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Questions about the current pandemic

from the point of view of Ivan Illich

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Last week I began an essay on the current pandemic in which I tried to address what I take to be the central question that it raises: Is the massive and costly effort to contain and limit the harm that the virus will do the only choice we have? Is it no more than an obvious and unavoidable exercise of prudence undertaken to protect the most vulnerable? Or is it a disastrous effort to maintain control of what is obviously out of control, an effort which will compound the damage being done by the disease with new troubles that will reverberate far into the future? I hadn't been writing for long before I began to realize that many of the assumptions I was making were quite remote from those being expressed all around me. These assumptions had mainly come, I reflected, from my prolonged conversation with the work of Ivan Illich. What this suggested was that, before I could speak intelligibly about our present circumstances, I would first have to sketch the attitude towards health, medicine and well-being that Illich developed over a lifetime of reflection on these themes. Accordingly, in what follows, I will start with a brief account of the evolution of Illich's critique of bio-medicine and then try to answer the questions I just posed in this light.

At the beginning of his 1973 book *Tools of Conviviality*, Illich described what he thought was the typical course of development followed by contemporary institutions, using medicine as his example. Medicine, he said, had gone through "two watersheds." The first had been crossed in the early years of the 20th century when medical treatments became demonstrably effective and benefits generally began to exceed harms. For many medical historians this is the only relevant marker – from this point on progress will proceed indefinitely, and, though there may be diminishing returns, there will be no point, in principle, at which progress will stop. This was not the case for Illich. He hypothesized a second watershed, which he thought was already being crossed and even exceeded around the time he was writing. Beyond this second watershed, he supposed, what he called counterproductivity would set in – medical intervention would begin to defeat its own objects, generating more harm than good. This, he argued, was characteristic of any institution, good or service – a point could be identified at which there was enough of it and, after which, there would be too much. *Tools for Conviviality*, was an attempt to identify these "natural scales" – the only such general and programmatic search for a philosophy of technology that Illich undertook.

Two years later in *Medical Nemesis* – later renamed, in its final and most comprehensive edition, *Limits to Medicine* – Illich tried to lay out in detail the goods and the harms that medicine does. He was generally favourable to the large-scale innovations in public health that have given us good food, safe water, clean air, sewage disposal etc. He also praised efforts then underway in China and Chile to establish a basic medical toolkit and pharmacopeia that would be available and affordable for all citizens, rather than allowing medicine to develop luxury goods that would remain forever out of reach of the majority. But the main point of his book was to identify and describe the counterproductive effects that he felt were becoming evident as medicine crossed its second watershed. He spoke of these fall-outs from too much medicine as *iatrogenesis*, and addressed them under three headings: clinical, social and cultural. The first everyone, by now,

understands – you get the wrong diagnosis, the wrong drug, the wrong operation, you get sick in hospital etc. This collateral damage is not trivial. An article in the Canadian magazine *The Walrus* – Rachel Giese, "The Errors of Their Ways, April 2012 – estimated 7.5% of the Canadians admitted to hospitals every year suffer at least one "adverse event" and 24,000 die as a result of medical mistakes. Around the same time, Ralph Nader, writing in *Harper's Magazine*, suggested that the number of people in the United States who die annually as a result of preventable medical errors is around 400,000. This is an impressive number, even if exaggerated – Nader's estimate is twice as high per capita as *The Walrus*'s – but this accidental harm was not, by any means, Illich's focus. What really concerned him was the way in which excessive medical treatment weakens basic social and cultural aptitudes. An instance of what he called social iatrogenesis is the way in which the *art* of medicine, in which the physician acts as healer, witness, and counsellor, tends to give way to the *science* of medicine, in which the doctor, as a scientist, must, by definition, treat his or her patient as an experimental subject and not as a unique case. And, finally, there was the ultimate injury that medicine inflicts: cultural iatrogenesis. This occurs, Illich said, when cultural abilities, built up and passed on over many generations, are first undermined and then, gradually, replaced altogether. These abilities include, above all, the willingness to suffer and bear one's own reality, and the capacity to die one's own death. The art of suffering was being overshadowed, he argued, by the expectation that all suffering can and should be immediately relieved – an attitude which doesn't, in fact, end suffering but rather renders it meaningless, making it merely an anomaly or technical miscarriage. And death, finally, was being transformed from an intimate, personal act – something each one can do – into a meaningless defeat – a mere cessation of treatment or "pulling the plug," as is sometimes heartlessly said. Behind Illich's arguments lay a traditional Christian attitude. He affirmed that suffering and death are inherent in the human condition – they are part of what defines this condition. And he argued that the loss of this condition would involve a catastrophic rupture both with our past and with our own creatureliness. To mitigate and ameliorate the

human condition was good, he said. To lose it altogether was a catastrophe because we can only know God as creatures – i.e. created or given beings – not as gods who have taken charge of our own destiny.

Medical Nemesis is a book about professional power – a point on which it's worth dwelling for a moment in view of the extraordinary powers that are currently being asserted in the name of public health. According to Illich, contemporary medicine, at all times, exercises *political* power, though this character may be hidden by the claim that all that is being asserted is *care*. In the province of Ontario where I live, "health care" currently gobbles up more than 40% of the government's budget, which should make the point clearly enough. But this everyday power, great as it is, can be further expanded by what Illich calls "the ritualization of crisis." This confers on medicine "a license that usually only the military can claim." He continues:

> "Under the stress of crisis, the professional who is believed to be in command can easily presume immunity from the ordinary rules of justice and decency. He who is assigned control over death ceases to be an ordinary human…Because they form a charmed borderland not quite of this world, the time-span and the community space claimed by the medical enterprise are as sacred as their religious and military counterparts."

In a footnote to this passage Illich adds that "he who successfully claims power in an emergency suspends and can destroy rational evaluation. The insistence of the physician on his exclusive capacity to evaluate and solve individual crises moves him symbolically into the neighborhood of the White House." There is a striking parallel here with the German jurist Carl Schmitt's claim in his *Political Theology* that the hallmark of true sovereignty is the power to "decide on the exception." Schmitt's point is that sovereignty stands above law because in an emergency the sovereign can suspend the law – declare an exception - and rule in its place as the very source of law. This is precisely the power that Illich says the physician "claims…in an emergency." Exceptional circumstances make him/her "immune" to the "ordinary rules" and able to make new ones as the case dictates. But there is an interesting and, to me, telling difference between Schmitt

and Illich. Schmitt is transfixed by what he calls "the political." Illich notices that much of what Schmitt calls sovereignty has escaped, or been usurped from the political realm and reinvested in various professional hegemonies.

Ten years after *Medical Nemesis* was published, Illich revisited and revised his argument. He did not, by any means, renounce what he had written earlier, but he did add to it quite dramatically. In his book, he now said, he had been "blind to a much more profound symbolic iatrogenic effect: the iatrogenesis of the body itself." He had "overlooked the degree to which, at mid-century, the experience of 'our bodies and our selves' had become the result of medical concepts and cares." In other words he had written, in *Medical Nemesis*, as if there were a natural body, standing outside the web of techniques by which its self-awareness is constructed, and now he could see that there is no such standpoint. "Each historical moment," he wrote, "is incarnated in an epoch-specific body." Medicine doesn't just act on a preexisting state – rather it participates in creating this state.

This recognition was just the beginning of a new stance on Illich's part. *Medical Nemesis* had addressed a citizenry that was imagined as capable of acting to limit the scope of medical intervention. Now he spoke of people whose very self-image was being generated by bio-medicine. *Medical Nemesis* had claimed, in its opening sentence, that "the medical establishment has become a major threat to health." Now he judged that that the major threat to health was the pursuit of health itself. Behind this change of mind lay his sense that the world, in the meanwhile, had undergone an epochal change. "I believe," he told me in 1988, "that…there [has been] a change in the mental space in which many people live. Some kind of a catastrophic breakdown of one way of seeing things has led to the emergence of a different way of seeing things. The subject of my writing has been the perception of sense in the way we live; and, in this respect, we are, in my opinion, at this moment, passing over a watershed. I had not expected in my lifetime to observe this passage." Illich characterized "the new way of seeing things" as the advent of what he called "the age of systems" or "an ontology of systems." The age that he

saw as ending had been dominated by the idea of instrumentality – of using instrumental means, like medicine, to achieve some end or good, like health. Characteristic of this age was a clear distinction between subjects and objects, means and ends, tools and their users etc. In the age of systems, he said, these distinctions have collapsed. A system, conceived cybernetically, is all encompassing – it has no outside. The user of a tool takes up the tool to accomplish some end. Users of systems are inside the system, constantly adjusting their state to the system, as the system adjusts its state to them. A bounded individual pursuing personal well-being gives way to an immune system which constantly recalibrates its porous boundary with the surrounding system.

Within this new "system analytic discourse," as Illich named it, the characteristic state of people is disembodiment. This is a paradox, obviously, since what Illich called "the pathogenic pursuit of health" may involve an intense, unremitting and virtually narcissistic preoccupation with one's bodily state. Why Illich conceived it as disembodying can best be understood by the example of "risk awareness" which he called "the most important religiously celebrated ideology today." Risk was disembodying, he said, because "it is a strictly mathematical concept." It does not pertain to persons but to populations – no one knows what will happen to this or that person, but what will happen to the aggregate of such persons can be expressed as a probability. To identify oneself with this statistical figment is to engage, Illich said, in "intensive self-algorithmization."

His most distressing encounter with this "religiously celebrated ideology" occurred in the field of genetic testing during pregnancy. He was introduced to it by his friend and colleague Silja Samerski who was studying the genetic counselling that is mandatory for pregnant women considering genetic testing in Germany – a subject she would later write about in a book called *The Decision Trap* [1]. Genetic testing in pregnancy does not reveal anything definite about the child which the woman being tested is expecting. All it detects are markers whose uncertain

[1] Silja Samerski, *The Decision Trap*, *Genetic Education and Its Social Consequences*, Imprint-Academic, 2015.

meaning can be expressed in probabilities – a likelihood calculated across the entire population to which the one being tested belongs, by her age, family history, ethnicity etc. When she is told, for example, that there is a 30% chance that her baby will have this or that syndrome, she is told nothing about herself or the fruit of her womb – she is told only what *might* happen to someone *like* her. She knows nothing more about her actual circumstances than what her hopes, dreams and intuitions reveal, but the risk profile that has been ascertained for her statistical doppelganger demands a decision. The choice is existential; the information on which it is based is the probability curve on which the chooser has been inscribed. Illich found this to be a perfect horror. It was not that he could not recognize that all human action is a shot in the dark – a prudential calculation in the face of the unknown. His horror was at seeing people reconceive themselves in the image of a statistical construct. For him, this was an eclipse of persons by populations; an effort to prevent the future from disclosing anything unforeseen; and a substitution of scientific models for sensed experience. And this was happening, Illich realized, not just with regard to genetic testing in pregnancy but more or less across the board in health care. Increasingly people were acting prospectively, probabilistically, according to their risk. They were becoming, as Canadian health researcher Allan Cassels once joked, "pre-diseased" – vigilant and active against illnesses that someone like them might get. Individual cases were increasingly managed as general cases, as instances of a category or class, rather than as unique predicaments, and doctors were increasingly the servo-mechanisms of this cloud of probabilities rather than intimate advisors alert to specific differences and personal meanings. This was what Illich meant by "self-algorithmization" or disembodiment.

One way of getting at the iatrogenic body that Illich saw as the primary effect of contemporary biomedicine is by going back to an essay that was widely read and discussed in his milieu in the early 1990's. Called "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse," it was written by historian and philosopher of science Donna Haraway and appears in her 1991 book

Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. This essay is interesting not just because I think it influenced Illich's sense of how bio-medical discourse was shifting, but also because Haraway, seeing – I would claim – almost exactly the same things as Illich, draws conclusions that are, point-for-point, diametrically opposite. In this article, for example, she says, with reference to what she calls "the post-modern body," that "human beings, like any other component or subsystem, must be localized in a system architecture whose basic modes of operation are probabilistic, statistical." "In a sense," she continues, "organisms have ceased to exist as objects of knowledge, giving way to biotic components." This leads to a situation in which "no objects, spaces or bodies are sacred in themselves; and components can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language." In a world of interfaces, where boundaries regulate "rates of flow" rather than marking real differences, "the integrity of natural objects" is no longer a concern. "The 'integrity' or 'sincerity' of the Western self," she writes, "gives way to decision procedures, expert systems, and resource investment strategies."

In other words, Haraway, like Illich understands that persons, as unique, stable and hallowed beings, have dissolved into provisionally self-regulating sub-systems in constant interchange with the larger systems in which they are enmeshed. In her words, "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism…the cyborg is our ontology." The difference between them lies in their reactions. Haraway, elsewhere in the volume from which the essay I have been quoting comes, issues what she calls her "Cyborg Manifesto." It calls on people to recognize and accept this new situation but to "read it" with a view to liberation. In a patriarchal society, there is no acceptable condition to which one could hope to return, so she offers "an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction." For Illich, on the other hand, the "cyborg ontology," as Haraway calls it, was not an option. For him what was at stake was the very character of human persons as ensouled beings with a divine origin and a divine destiny. As the last vestiges of

sense washed out of the bodily self-perception of his contemporaries, he saw a world that had become "immune to its own salvation." "I have come to the conclusion," he told me plaintively, "that when the angel Gabriel told that girl in the town of Nazareth in Galilee that God wanted to be in her belly, he pointed to a body which has gone from the world in which I live."

The "new way of seeing things" which was reflected in the orientation of bio-medicine amounted, according to Illich, to "a new stage of religiosity." He used the word *religiosity* in a broad sense to refer to something deeper and more pervasive than formal or institutional religion. Religiosity is the ground on which we stand, our feeling about how and why things are as they are, the very horizon within which meaning takes shape. For Illich, the createdness, or given-ness of the world was the foundation of his entire sensibility. What he saw coming was a religiosity of total immanence in which the world is its own cause and there is no source of meaning or order outside of it – "a cosmos," as he said, "in the hands of man." The highest good in such a world is life, and the primary duty of people is to conserve and foster life. But this is not the *life* which is spoken of in the Bible – the life which comes from God – it is a rather a resource which people possess and ought to manage responsibly. Its peculiar property is to be at the same time an object of reverence and of manipulation. This naturalized life, divorced from its source, is the new god. Health and safety are its adjutants. Its enemy is death. Death still imposes a final defeat but has no other personal meaning. There is no proper time to die – death ensues when treatment fails or is terminated.

Illich refused to "interiorize systems into the self." He would give up neither human nature nor natural law. "I just cannot shed the certainty," he said in an interview with his friend Douglas Lummis, "that the norms with which we ought to live correspond to our insight into what we are." This led him to reject "responsibility for health," conceived as a management of intermeshed systems. How can one be responsible, he asked, for what has neither sense, boundary nor ground? Better to give up such comforting illusions and to live instead in a spirit

of self-limitation which he defined as "courageous, disciplined, self-critical renunciation accomplished in community."

To summarize: Illich, in his later years, concluded that humanity, at least in his vicinity, had taken leave of its senses and moved lock, stock and barrel into a system construct lacking any ground whatsoever for ethical decision. The bodies in which people lived and walked around had become synthetic constructs woven out of CAT-scans and risk curves. Life had become a quasi-religious idol, presiding over an "ontology of systems." Death had become a meaningless obscenity rather than an intelligible companion. All this was expressed forcefully and unequivocally. He did not attempt to soften it or offer a comforting "on the other hand…". What he attended to was what he sensed was happening around him, and all his care was to try to register it as sensitively as he could and address it as truthfully as he could. The world, in his view, was not in his hands, but in the hands of God.

By the time he died, in 2002, Illich stood far outside the new "way of seeing things" that he felt had established itself during the second half his life. He felt that in this new "age of systems" the primary unit of creation, the human person, had begun to lose its boundary, its distinction and its dignity. He thought that the revelation in which he was rooted had been corrupted – the "life more abundant" that had been promised in the New Testament transformed into a human hegemony so total and so claustrophobic that no intimation from outside the system could disturb it. He believed that medicine had so far exceeded the threshold at which it might have eased and complemented the human condition that it was now threatening to abolish this condition altogether. And he had concluded that much of humanity is no longer willing to "bear…[its] rebellious, torn and disoriented flesh" and has instead traded its art of suffering and its art of dying for a few years of life expectancy and the comforts of life in an "artificial creation." Can any sense be made of the current "crisis" from this point of view? I would say yes, but only insofar as we can step back from the urgencies of the moment and take time to consider what is being

revealed about our underlying dispositions – our "certainties," as Illich called them.

First of all, Illich's perspective indicates that for some time now we've been practicing the attitudes that have characterized the response to the current pandemic. It's a striking thing about events which are perceived to have changed history, or "changed everything," as one sometimes hears, that people often seem to be somehow ready for them or even unconsciously or semi-consciously expecting them. Recalling the beginning of the First World War, economic historian Karl Polanyi used the image of sleep-walking to characterize the way in which the countries of Europe shuffled to their doom – automatons blindly accepting the fate they had unknowingly projected. The events of Sept. 11, 2001 – 9/11 as we now know it – seemed to be instantly interpreted and understood, as if everyone had just been waiting to declare the patent meaning of what had occurred – the end of the Age of Irony, the beginning of the War on Terror, whatever it might be. Some of this is surely a trick of perspective by which hindsight instantly turns contingency into necessity – since something did happen, we assume that it was bound to happen all along. But I don't think this can be the whole story.

At the heart of the coronavirus response has been the claim that we must act prospectively to prevent what has not yet occurred: an exponential growth in infections, an overwhelming of the resources of the medical system, which will put medical personnel in the invidious position of performing triage, etc. Otherwise, it is said, by the time we find out what we're dealing with, it will be too late. (It's worth pointing out, in passing, that this is unverifiable idea: if we succeed, and what we fear does not take place, then we will be able to say that our actions prevented it, but we will never actually know whether this was the case.). This idea that prospective action is crucial has been readily accepted, and people have even vied with one in another in denouncing the laggards who have shown resistance to it. But to act like this requires experience in living in a hypothetical space where prevention outranks cure, and this is exactly what Illich describes when he speaks

of risk as "the most important religiously celebrated ideology today." An expression like "flattening the curve" can become overnight common sense only in a society practiced in "staying ahead of the curve" and in thinking in terms of population dynamics rather than actual cases.

Risk has a history. One of the first to identify it as the preoccupation of a new form of society was German sociologist Ulrich Beck in his 1986 book *Risk Society*, published in English in 1992. In this book, Beck portrayed late modernity as an uncontrolled science experiment. By uncontrolled he meant that we have no spare planet on which we can conduct a nuclear war to see how it goes, no second atmosphere which we can heat and observe the results. This means that techno-scientific society is, on the one hand, hyper-scientific and, on the other, radically unscientific insofar as it has no standard against which it can measure or assess what it has done. There are endless examples of this sort of uncontrolled experiment – from test-tube babies and transgenic sheep to mass international tourism and the transformation of persons into communications relays. All these, insofar as they have unforeseeable and unpredictable consequences, already constitute a kind of living in the future. And just because we are citizens of risk society, and therefore participants by definition, in an uncontrolled science experiment, we have become – paradoxically or not – preoccupied with controlling risk. As I pointed out above, we are treated and screened for diseases we do not yet have, on the basis of our probability of getting them. Pregnant couples make life and death decisions based on probabilistic risk profiles. Safety becomes a mantra – "farewell" becomes "be safe" – *health* becomes a god.

Equally important in the current atmosphere has been the idolization of life, and aversion from its obscene other, death. That we must at all costs "save lives" is not questioned. This makes it very easy to start a stampede. Making an entire country "go home and stay home," as our prime minister said not long ago, has immense and incalculable costs. No one knows how many businesses will fail, how many jobs will be lost, how many will sicken from loneliness, how many will resume

addictions or beat each other up in their isolation. But these costs seem bearable as soon the spectre of lives lost is brought on the scene. Again, we have been practicing counting lives for a long time. The obsession with the "death toll" from the latest catastrophe is simply the other side of the coin. Life becomes an abstraction – a number without a story.

Illich claimed in the mid-1980's that he was beginning to meet people whose "very selves" were a product of "medical concepts and cares." I think this helps to explain why the Canadian state, and its component provincial and municipal governments, have largely failed to acknowledge what is currently at stake in our "war" on "the virus." Sheltering behind the skirts of science – even where there is no science – and deferring to the gods of health and safety has appeared to them as political necessity. Those who have been acclaimed for their leadership, like Quebec premier François Legault, have been those who have distinguished themselves by their single-minded consistency in applying the conventional wisdom. Few have yet dared to question the cost – and, when those few include Donald Trump, the prevailing complacency is only fortified – who would dare agree with him? In this respect insistent repetition of the metaphor of war has been influential – in a war no one counts costs or reckons who is actually paying them. First, we must win the war. Wars create social solidarity and discourage dissent – those not showing the flag are apt to be shown the equivalent of the white feather with which non-combatants were shamed during World War One.

At the date at which I am writing – early April – no one really knows what is going on. Since no one knows how many have the disease, nobody knows what the death rate is – Italy's is currently listed at over 10%, which puts it in the range of the catastrophic influenza at the end of World War I, while Germany's is at .8%, which is more in line with what happens unremarked every year – some very old people, and a few younger ones, catch the flu and die. What does seem clear, here in Canada, is that, with the exception of a few local sites of true emergency, the pervasive sense of panic and crisis is largely a result of the measures taken against the pandemic and not of the pandemic itself.

Here the word itself has played an important role – the declaration by the World Health Organization that a pandemic was now officially in progress didn't change anyone's health status but it dramatically changed the public atmosphere. It was the signal the media had been waiting for to introduce a regime in which nothing else but the virus could be discussed. By now a story in the newspaper not concerned with coronavirus is actually shocking. This cannot help but give the impression of a world on fire. If you talk about nothing else, it will soon come to seem as if there is nothing else. A bird, a crocus, a spring breeze can begin to seem almost irresponsible – "don't they know it's the end of the world?" as an old country music classic asks. The virus acquires extraordinary agency – it is said to have depressed the stock market, shuttered businesses, and generated panic fear, as if these were not the actions of responsible people but of the illness itself. Emblematic for me, here in Toronto, was a headline in *The National Post*. In a font that occupied much of the top half of the front page, it said simply **PANIC**. Nothing indicated whether the word was to be read as a description or an instruction. This ambiguity is constitutive of all media, and disregarding it is the characteristic *déformation professionelle* of the journalist, but it becomes particularly easy to ignore in a certified crisis. It is not the obsessive reporting or the egging on of authorities to do more that has turned the world upside down – it is the virus that has done it. Don't blame the messenger. A headline on the web-site STAT on April 1, and I don't think it was a joke, even claimed that "Covid-19 has sunk the ship of state." It is interesting, in this respect, to perform a thought experiment. How much of an emergency would we feel ourselves to be in if this had never been called a pandemic and such stringent measures taken against it? Plenty of troubles escape the notice of the media. How much do we know or care about the catastrophic political disintegration of South Sudan in recent years, or about the millions who died in the Democratic Republic of Congo after civil war broke out there in 2004? It is our attention that constitutes what we take to be the relevant world at any given moment. The media do not act alone – people must be disposed to attend where the media directs their

attention – but I don't think it can be denied that the pandemic is a constructed object that might have been constructed differently.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau remarked on March 25th that we are facing "the greatest health care crisis in our history." If he is understood to be referring to a health crisis, this seems to me a grotesque exaggeration. Think of the disastrous effect of smallpox on indigenous communities, or of a score of other catastrophic epidemics from cholera and yellow fever to diphtheria and polio. Can you then really say that a flu epidemic which appears mainly to kill the old or those made susceptible by some other condition is even comparable to the ravaging of whole peoples, let alone worse? And yet, unprecedented, like the Prime Minister's "greatest ever," seems to be the word on everyone's lips. However, if we take the Prime Minister's words by the letter, as referring to health care, and not just health, the case changes. From the beginning the public health measures taken in Canada have been explicitly aimed at protecting the health care system from any overload. To me this points to an extraordinary dependence on hospitals and an extraordinary lack of confidence in our ability to care for one another. Whether Canadian hospitals are ever flooded or not, a strange and fearful mystique seems to be involved – the hospital and its cadres are felt to be indispensable, even when things could be more easily and safely dealt with at home. Again Illich was prescient in his claim, in his essay "Disabling Professions," that overextended professional hegemonies sap popular capacities and make people doubt their own resources.

The measures mandated by "the greatest health care crisis in our history" have involved a remarkable curtailing of civil liberty. This has been done, it is said, to protect life and, by the same token, to avoid death. Death is not only to be averted but also kept hidden and unconsidered. Years ago I heard a story about a bemused listener at one of Illich's lectures on *Medical Nemesis* who afterwards turned to his companion and asked, "What does he want, let people die?" Perhaps some of my readers would like to ask me the same question. Well, I'm sure there are many other old people who would join me in saying that

they don't want to see young lives ruined in order that they can live a year or two longer. But, beyond that, "let people die" is a very funny formulation because it implies that the power to determine who lives or dies is in the hands of the one to whom the question is addressed. The we who are imagined as having the power to "let die" exist in an ideal world of perfect information and perfect technical mastery. In this world nothing occurs which has not been chosen. If someone dies, it will be because they have been "let…die." The state must, at all costs, foster, regulate and protect life – this is the essence of what Michel Foucault called biopolitics, the regime that now unquestionably rules us. Death must be kept out of sight and out of mind. It must be denied meaning. No one's time ever comes – they are let go. The grim reaper may survive as a comic figure in New Yorker cartoons, but he has no place in public discussion. This makes it difficult even to talk about death as something other than someone's negligence or, at the least, a final exhaustion of treatment options. To accept death is to accept defeat.

The events of recent weeks reveal how totally we live inside systems, how much we have become populations rather than associated citizens, how much we are governed by the need to continually outsmart the future we ourselves have prepared. When Illich wrote books like *Tools for Conviviality and Medical Nemesis*, he still hoped that life within limits was possible. He tried to identify the thresholds at which technology must be restrained in order to keep the world at the local, sensible, conversable scale on which human beings could remain the political animals that Aristotle thought we were meant to be. Many others saw the same vision, and many have tried over the last fifty years to keep it alive. But there is no doubt that the world Illich warned of has come to pass. It is a world which lives primarily in disembodied states and hypothetical spaces, a world of permanent emergency in which the next crisis is always right around the corner, a world in which the ceaseless babble of communication has stretched language past its breaking point, a world in which overstretched science has become indistinguishable from superstition. How then can Illich's ideas possibly gain any purchase in a world that seems to have moved out of reach of

his concepts of scale, balance, and personal meaning? Shouldn't one just accept that the degree of social control that has recently been exerted is proportionate and necessary in the global immune system of which we are, in Haraway's expression, "biotic components"?

Perhaps, but it's an old political axiom which can be found in Plato, Thomas More, and, more recently, Canadian philosopher George Grant that if you can't achieve the best, at least prevent the worst. And things can certainly get worse as a result of this pandemic. It has already become a somewhat ominous commonplace that the world will not be the same once it is over. Some see it as a rehearsal and admit frankly that, though this particular plague may not fully justify the measures being taken against it, these measures still constitute a valuable rehearsal for future and potentially worse plagues. Others view it as a "wake-up call" and hope that, when it's all over, a chastened humanity will begin to edge its way back from the lip of catastrophe. My fear, and one that I think is shared by many, is that it will leave behind a disposition to accept much increased surveillance and social control, more telescreens and telepresencing, and heightened mistrust. At the moment, everyone is optimistically describing physical distancing as a form of solidarity, but it's also practice in regarding one another, and even ourselves – "don't touch your face" – as potential disease vectors.

I have said already that one of the certainties that the pandemic is driving deeper into the popular mind is risk. But this is easy to overlook since risk is so easily conflated with real danger. The difference, I would say, is that danger is identified by a practical judgment resting on experience, whereas risk is a statistical construct pertaining to a population. Risk has no room for individual experience or for practical judgment. It tells you only what will happen *in general*. It is an abstract of a population, not a picture of any person, or a guide to that person's destiny. Destiny is a concept that simply dissolves in the face of risk, where all are arrayed, uncertainly, on the same curve. What Illich calls "the mysterious historicity" of each existence – or, more simply, its meaning – is annulled. During this pandemic, risk society has come of age. This is evident, for example, in the tremendous authority that has

been accorded to models – even when everyone knows that they are informed by little more than what one hopes are educated guesses. Another illustration is the familiarity with which people speak of "flattening the curve," as if this were an everyday object – I have even recently heard songs about it. When it becomes an object of public policy to operate on a purely imaginary, mathematical object, like a risk curve, it is certain that risk society has taken a great leap forward. This, I think, is what Illich meant about disembodiment – the impalpable become palpable, the hypothetical becomes actual, and the realm of everyday experience becomes indistinguishable from its representation in newsrooms, laboratories and statistical models. Humans have lived, at all times, in imagined worlds, but this, I think, is different. In the sphere of religion, for example, even the most naïve believers have the sense that the beings they summon and address in their gatherings are not everyday objects. In the discourse of the pandemic, everyone consorts familiarly with scientific phantoms as if there were as real as rocks and trees.

Another related feature of the current landscape is government-by-science and its necessary complement - the abdication of political leadership resting on any other grounds. This too is a field long-tilled and prepared for planting. Illich wrote nearly fifty years ago in *Tools for Conviviality* that contemporary society is "stunned by a delusion about science." This delusion takes many forms, but its essence is to construct out of the messy, contingent practices of a myriad of sciences a single golden calf before which all must bow. It is this giant mirage that is usually invoked when we are instructed to "listen to the science" or told what "studies show" or "science says." But there is no such thing as science, only *sciences*, each one with its unique uses and unique limitations. When "science" is abstracted from all the vicissitudes and shadows of knowledge production, and elevated into an omniscient oracle whose priests can be identified by their outfits, their solemn postures and their impressive credentials, what suffers, in Illich's view, is political judgment. We do not do what appears good to our rough and ready sense of how things are down here on the ground but only what can be dressed up as *science says*. In a book called *Rationality and*

Ritual, British sociologist of science Brian Wynne studied a public inquiry carried out by a British High Court Judge in 1977 on the question of whether a new plant should be added to the British nuclear energy complex at Sellafield on the Cumbrian coast. Wynne shows how the judge approached the question as one which "science" would answer – is it safe? – without any need to consult moral or political principles. This is a classic case of the displacement of political judgment onto the shoulders of Science, conceived along the mythical lines I sketched above. This displacement is now evident in many fields. One of its hallmarks is that people, thinking that "science" knows more than it does, imagine that they know more than they do. No actual knowledge need support this confidence. Epidemiologists may say frankly, as many have, that, in the present case, there is very little sturdy evidence to go on, but this has not prevented politicians from acting as if they were merely the executive arm of Science. In my opinion, the adoption of a policy of semi-quarantining those who are not sick – a policy apt to have disastrous consequences down the road in lost jobs, failed businesses, distressed people, and debt-suffocated governments – is a political decision and ought to be discussed as such. But, at the moment, the ample skirts of Science shelter all politicians from view. Nor does anyone speak of impending moral decisions. Science will decide.

In his late writings Illich introduced, but never really developed, a concept that he called "epistemic sentimentality" – not a catchy phrase, admittedly, but one that I think sheds on light on what is currently going on. His argument, in brief, was that we live in a world of "fictitious substances" and "management-bred phantoms" – any number of nebulous goods from institutionally-defined education to the "pathogenic pursuit of health" could serve as examples – and that in this "semantic desert full of muddled echoes" we need "some prestigious fetish" to serve as a "Linus blanket." In the essay I've been quoting "Life" is his primary example. "Epistemic sentimentality" attaches itself to Life, and Life becomes the banner under which projects of social control and technological overreach acquire warmth and lustre. Illich calls this *epistemic* sentimentality because it involves

constructed objects of knowledge that are then naturalized under the kindly aegis of the "prestigious fetish." In the present case we are frantically saving lives and protecting our health care system. These noble objects enable a gush of sentiment which is very hard to resist. For me it is summed up in the almost unbearably unctuous tone in which our Prime Minister now addresses us daily. But who is not in an agony of solicitude? Who has not said that we are avoiding each other because of the depth of our care for one another? This is epistemic sentimentality not just because it solaces us and makes a ghostly reality seem humane but also because it hides the other things that are going on – like the mass experiment in social control and social compliance, the legitimation of tele-presence as a mode of sociability and of instruction, the increase of surveillance, the normalization of biopolitics, and the reinforcement of risk awareness as a foundation of social life.

Another concept that I believe Illich has to contribute to current discussion is the idea of "dynamic balances" that he develops in *Tools for Conviviality*. This thought came to me recently while reading, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a refutation of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's dissident position on the pandemic. Agamben had written earlier against the inhumanity of a policy that lets people die alone and then outlaws funerals, arguing that a society which sets "bare life" higher than the preservation of its own way of life has embraced what amounts to a fate worse than death. Fellow philosopher Anastasia Berg, in her response, expresses respect for Agamben, but then claims that he has missed the boat. People are cancelling funerals, isolating the sick and avoiding one another not because mere survival has become the be-all and end-all of public policy, as Agamben claims, but in a spirit of loving sacrifice which Agamben is too obtuse and theory-besotted to notice. The two positions appear starkly opposed, and the choice an either/or. One either views social distancing, with Anastasia Berg, as a paradoxical and sacrificial form of solidarity, or one views it with Agamben as a fateful step into a world where inherited ways of life dissolve in an ethos of survival at all costs. What Illich tried to argue in *Tools for Conviviality* is that public policy must always strike a balance

between opposed domains, opposed rationalities, opposed virtues. The whole book is an attempt to discern the point at which serviceable tools – tools *for* conviviality – turn into tools which become ends in themselves and begin to dictate to their users. In the same way he tried to distinguish practical political judgment from expert opinion, home-made speech from the coinages of mass media, vernacular practices from institutional norms. Many of these attempted distinctions have since drowned in the monochrome of "the system," but the idea can still be helpful I think. It encourages us to ask the question, what is enough? where is the point of balance? Right now this question is not asked because the goods we pursue are generally taken to be unlimited – we cannot, by assumption, have too much education, too much health, too much law, or too much of any of the other institutional staples on which we lavish our hope and our substance. But what if the question were revived? This would require us to ask in what way Agamben might be right, while still allowing Berg's point. Perhaps a point of balance could be found. But this would require some ability to sustain a divided mind – the very hallmark of thinking, according to Hannah Arendt – as well as the resuscitation of political judgment. Such an exercise of political judgment would involve a discussion of what is being lost in the present crisis as well as what is being gained. But who deliberates in an emergency? Total mobilization – total preoccupation – the feeling that everything has changed – the certainty of living in a state of exception rather than in ordinary time – all these things militate against political deliberation. This is a vicious circle: we can't deliberate because we're in an emergency, and we're in an emergency because we can't deliberate. The only way out of the circle is by the way in – the way created by assumptions that have become so ingrained as to seem obvious.

Illich had a sense, during the last twenty years of his life, of a world immured in "an ontology of systems," a world immune to grace, alienated from death, and totally convinced of its duty to manage every eventuality – a world, as he once put it, in which "exciting, soul-capturing abstractions have extended themselves over the perception of world and self like plastic pillowcases." Such a view does not readily

lend itself to policy prescriptions. Policy is made in the moment according to the exigencies of the moment. Illich was talking about modes of sensing, of thinking, and of feeling that had crept into people at a much deeper level. Accordingly, I hope that no one who has read this far thinks that I have been making facile policy proposals rather than trying to describe a fate that all share. Still my view of the situation is probably clear enough from what I have written. I think this tunnel we have entered – of physical distancing, flattening the curve etc. – will be very hard to get out of – either we call it off soon and face the possibility that it was all for naught, or we extend it and create harms that may be worse than the casualties we have averted. This is not to say we should do nothing. It *is* a pandemic. But it would have been better, in my view, to try and keep going and used targeted quarantine for the demonstrably ill and their contacts. Close baseball stadiums and large hockey arenas, by all means, but keep small businesses open and attempt to space the customers in the same way as the stores that have stayed open are doing. Would more then die? Perhaps, but this is far from clear. And that's exactly my point: no one knows. Swedish economist Fredrik Erixon, the director of the European Centre for International Political Economy, made the same point recently in defence of Sweden's current policy of precaution without shut-down. "The theory of lockdown," he says, is "untested" – which is true – and, consequently, "It's not Sweden that's conducting a mass experiment. It's everyone else."

But, to say it again, my intention here is not to contest policy but to bring to light the practiced certainties that make our current policy seem incontestable. Let me take a final example. Recently a Toronto newspaper columnist suggested that the current emergency can be construed as a choice between "saving the economy" or "saving granny." In this figure two prime certainties are pitted against one another. If we take these phantoms as real things rather than as questionable constructions, we can only end up by setting a price on granny's head. Better, I want to argue, to try to think and speak in a different way. Perhaps the impossible choices thrown up by the world of modelling and management are a sign that things are being framed in

the wrong way. Is there a way to move from granny as a "demographic" to a person who can be nursed and comforted and accompanied to the end of her road; from The Economy as the ultimate abstraction to the shop down the street in which someone has invested all they have and which they may now lose. At present, "the crisis" holds reality hostage, captive in its enclosed and airless system. It's very difficult to find a way of speaking in which life is something other and more than a resource which each of us must responsibly manage, conserve, and, finally, save. But I think it important to take a careful look at what has come into the light in recent weeks: medical science's ability to "decide on the exception" and then take power; the media's power to remake what is sensed as reality, while disowning its own agency; the abdication of politics before Science, even when there is no science; the disabling of practical judgment; the enhanced power of risk awareness; and the emergence of Life as the new sovereign. Crises change history but not necessarily for the better. A lot will depend on what the event is understood to have meant. If, in the aftermath, the certainties I have sketched here are not brought into question, then the only possible outcome I can see is that they will fasten themselves all the more securely on our minds and become obvious, invisible, and unquestionable.

David Cayley,
April 8, 2020.

<http://www.davidcayley.com/blog/2020/4/8/questions-about-the-current-pandemic-from-the-point-of-view-of-ivan-illich-1>

David Cayley

Concerning life

an open letter to Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Wolfgang Palaver

June 2021

> "And the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No".
>
> They said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right; then then seized him and slew him in the fords of the Jordan. And there fell at that time forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites." (Judges 12: 3-6)

A shibboleth is a dividing line, and dividing lines are sharpest when they are razor thin. For the Ephraimites the price of forty-two thousand lives was nothing more than what linguists call an unvoiced fricative. Things are not yet quite so bad with us, but the pandemic has certainly brought division between friends. (And how great, after all, were the differences between Ephraimites and Gileadites, if all that distinguished them was the ability to make this crucial sound?) One of the shibboleths dividing us seems to be *life*. Recently two admired friends have taken issue with me over this word and the interpretation I have given of Ivan Illich's views on the subject. Theologian Wolfgang Palaver, in an interview in the German weekly *Die Zeit* for Dec. 23, 2020, expresses concern that Illich's claim that *life* has become "a fetish" is being abused as a justification for "sacrificing the weak." And French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy, in an article for the website AOC called "The True

Legacy of Ivan Illich," argues, similarly, that those who follow "the fashion of covidoscepticism" misunderstand and misappropriate Illich's strictures on "the idolization of life." Dupuy's article is the second of two on the "alleged 'sacralisation of life.'" The first denounces what Dupuy calls "the blindness of the intellectuals."

In Dupuy's essay I am named in a way that flatters my achievements as an interlocutor of Illich's before I "succumbed to the times." "Alas, a thousand times alas," he says, that "David Cayley himself" has "succumbed to the times" and now "multiplies his clichés and manifests his ignorance" while engaging in a "classic minimization of the severity of the pandemic." Palaver is milder and doesn't name me directly, but since I have been prominent amongst those who have tried to argue that "the idolization of life" has played a pernicious part in political responses to the pandemic, I include myself within that company whom he thinks have pushed Illich into dangerous territory, far beyond Illich's intention.

The stakes are high here. "Saving lives" has justified every policy adopted to counteract the pandemic during the last year, and *life* is likely to continue as the sacred sign in which the revised social order that emerges from the pandemic will root its legitimacy. Accordingly, it seems important to seek some clarity on what is now meant by this word. (I hope my frequent resort to italics will be understood as a way of marking the usage I want to question.). I will begin by trying to understand what is worrying Palaver and Dupuy, then present what I take to be Illich's view, and conclude with some reflection on the role of *life* in the present, and emerging, social order.

Palaver and Dupuy are concerned with what they call the protection or preservation of life. Both argue that those who "minimize" the pandemic, criticize the measures taken against it, or flout the rules for its containment are recklessly endangering their neighbours. Both focus particularly on Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben as the epitome of this recklessness. Agamben has argued throughout the pandemic that the official response has amounted to destroying the village in order to save it. By leaving the old to die alone and unconsoled, by making

people afraid of one another, and by banning funerals, church services and other elementary forms of social and cultural life, he has written, we have eviscerated what is left of our way of life, and allowed medicine to establish itself as an all-powerful and virtually incontestable religious cult. Dupuy is outspoken in his criticisms. Agamben's "intellectual posturing," he writes, is the "soft version" of the same "reactionary violence" as one sees in "American far-right groups…shouting, guns in hand, in front of the steps of their legislatures." This is already unfair and entirely *ad hominem,* but then Dupuy goes further. With respect to Agamben's concept of "bare life," by which Agamben clearly and explicitly means life without the cultural qualifications that give life narrative shape and dignity, Dupuy claims as an implication of this concept that Agamben must "despise… the simple, 'animal' life of the poor landless peasants of the Brazilian northeast." This seems to me to verge on slander as well as willful misreading.

Palaver, again, is milder and more temperate, but he too says that he is "upset" with Agamben. The relevant passage in Palaver's interview with *Die Zeit*: where he expresses this consternation is worth quoting in full:

> Agamben really upsets me. He is more papal than the Pope and more ecclesiastical than the Church. He claims that the Church has given up salvation and sacrificed it to health: because it sought salvation in history, it could only end in health. Nonsense! Why did Jesus heal people and take care of physical ailments? The many healings alone contradict Agamben's theological escape from the world. I am the LORD, your doctor. Or think of the miracle of the multiplication of bread. When people are hungry, you have to do something! Agamben practices bad theology when he tears salvation and health apart.
>
> … Agamben rightly laments an attitude for which health and survival are the most important things in life. But here one would have to ask: is it about my own life? Or is it the concern that applies to other people?

I can't overlook the possibility that this is mistranscribed, mistranslated or just spoken hastily off the cuff, but, if this is what Palaver meant to say, I think he goes too far. Jesus certainly fed people and healed people, but he didn't heal everyone or feed everyone. Indeed

he fed and healed people so sparingly that it seems fair to say that such actions, when he performed them, were intended illustratively rather than administratively or programmatically. This is the great issue in Dostoevsky's fable of the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor reproaches his Lord for not turning stones into bread when he was challenged to do so. Because of this failure to allow for the weakness of suffering humanity, which cries always, "Enslave [us] but feed us!", the Inquisitor says, it was necessary for the Church to step in to "correct and improve" the Gospel. I don't mean to imply that Palaver takes his stand with the Grand Inquisitor, but only to point to a profound ambiguity in the Gospel view of Jesus as physician. Yes, there are feedings and healings, but there are also declarations that the Kingdom is "not of this world" and references to a way or a path so narrow or so arduous that "few find it." It seems unwise therefore for Palaver to accuse Agamben of a "theological escape from the world." Agamben has never claimed to be a theologian, and his defence of particular "forms of life," like funerals for the dead or human solace for the dying, seems to me eminently worldly. What he lays at the Church's door is to have forgotten the messianic, and therefore to have lost a necessary "dialectical tension" between history and what exceeds or interrupts history. It is only between "these poles," Agamben claimed in an address to "the Church of our Lord" in Paris in 2009, that "a community can form and last." Palaver may disagree, but, in that case, I would expect arguments rather than irritation and dismissal ("Nonsense!")

The second point that Palaver makes is that the masked and distanced citizen is not necessarily concerned with his own life, but with the lives of others. Dupuy says just the same – it is not for myself that I take precautions but for others. Some of this is quite uncontroversial. Long before COVID I would have declined to go out into society with an infectious disease, and hoped for the same courtesy from others. But in a world where everyone is a danger to everyone else, and the threat of "asymptomatic transmission" inhibits all social interaction without exception, it seems to me that a limit of "responsibilization" has been reached and surpassed. Reconceptualizing society as an immune system writ large is a formula for social dissolution.

Palaver argues further that those who argue against lockdown and similar measures are preparing to "sacrifice the weak". Behind this willingness he says stands "scapegoat logic" – the logic of the High Priest when he says, in the Gospel narratives of the Passion, that "it is better that one man should die than that the whole people should perish." In the understanding that Palaver shares with his teacher René Girard, this was the archaic principle – timely sacrifice preserves social order - that first Judaism and then Christianity began to question and overturn. All "utility thinking," Palaver says, reasserts "scapegoat logic." "Only life can provide orientation," he concludes. I agree, but much turns, as we shall see, on what is meant by *life*.

Before turning to Illich I can't avoid saying, though with some trepidation, that in both Palaver and Dupuy, I feel I detect a note of panic. Once, long ago, after a lecture of Illich's on *Medical Nemesis,* a member of his audience turned to a friend of Illich's and asked in innocent perplexity, "What does he want? Let people die?" Both Dupuy and Palaver are more sophisticated, and more conversant with Illich's work, than was this bemused young man, and yet both seem, finally, to have reached the same sticking point. Lives must be saved – more or less at all costs – and anyone who argues otherwise has blindly forsaken "the height of humanism" (Dupuy) and succumbed to "scapegoat logic" and "social Darwinism." (Palaver)

Both my interlocutors think that "covidosceptics" are mistaking and abusing Illich's claim that *life* has become "an idol" and "a fetish." Palaver admits that Illich issued a salutary warning, but feels that Illich is being taken too prescriptively. Dupuy claims that's Illich's strictures on the "idolization of life" were intended only to prevent life's degradation, not to in any way limit its protection and preservation. To get to the bottom of this we will first have to establish what Illich, in fact, said.

Sometime in 1985 a Baptist minister by the name of Will Campbell approached Illich after a lecture to a group of social workers in Macon, Georgia. In his private papers, Illich left behind a brief account, written ten years later, of this fateful meeting:

> [Following the lecture] I noticed [a] man with…a…knotted walking stick coming towards me. He introduced himself as a preacher: "Will Campbell…who has to ask you for a great favour." I gasped, because that name I knew, "If you are the one who animated Martin Luther King, do not ask me but simply command, I obey." He mumbled something which ended in "…you darn papists" and then said, "You refused to speak about 'life'. You see, 'life' is tearing our churches apart. There are those who condemn capital punishment, but not the A-bomb, and others who call for the execution of abortionists. I will gather the representatives of our Churches so that you can talk to them."

I was frightened. I cast about in my mind what to make of such a call. Many months later, somewhere in Ohio, I faced the room full of 'church leaders' that Campbell had assembled. The mood was tense. A clergyman in the front row identified himself as the representative of the Catholic Bishop's Conference and urged me to start with a prayer. This trap I had to refuse; I told him that I would start with a solemn, formal curse and asked those who did not stand for such a ceremony to leave. Then, dramatically, I raised my hands and repeated three times, "To Hell With Life."

Beyond the curse I do not know what Illich said on this occasion – Ohio is a big place, the meeting left no further trace in Illich's papers, and I've never encountered anyone who can tell me anything more about it – but four years later, in Chicago, Illich addressed a conference convened by the American Lutheran Church on the same subject. This lecture, called "The Institutional Construction of a New Fetish: Human Life" was published, three years later, in Illich's book, *In the Mirror of the Past*. On that occasion Illich told his auditors, without qualification, that "life is the most powerful idol the Church has had to face in her history." "More than the ideology of empire or feudal order, more than nationalism or progress, more than Gnosticism or enlightenment, the acceptance of substantive life as a God-given reality lends itself to a new corruption of the Christian faith." The word "substantive" is important here, and I will return to it in a moment, but first I want to examine the claim that contemporary reverence for life corrupts Christian faith.

In the gospels, Jesus asserts, repeatedly, that He is Life. "He does not say, 'I am a life,'" Illich comments. "He says, 'I am Life,' *tout court.*" What is meant is more than merely being alive. The Life which Jesus incarnates and exemplifies can be given and received, Illich says, only as a gift. As such, it can be encountered, celebrated and shared, but it can never be ours to define or delimit, administer or control. This way of thinking and speaking about life, in which the word always implies a relationship to the One in whose gift Life lies, saturated the culture of Christendom for many centuries. "For much more than a millennium," Illich says, "it was quite clear that people can be among the living and be dead, and other people can be dead and have life. This is not simply a religious statement; this…became an ordinary everyday assumption." This everyday character is significant because it was Illich's argument that the "preconditions for modernity" were created by this acculturation of "Gospel truths." Modernity bent, folded and mutilated these truths, in his view, but it could never have come to be without them. This is why Illich dares to say that contemporary usage "abuses the word for the Incarnate God." He considered this a historical rather than a theological judgment. Trace the word *life* back through its many expressions in the Western theological, philosophical and scientific tradition, he said, and it will become evident that its meaning, however altered, continues to be shaped within the field that emanates from Latin Christendom.

The way we speak of life is rooted in a civilization once suffused with belief in the Incarnation. And this "Christian ancestry," is shared with "other key verities defining secular society." But at the same time the word's meaning has completely changed. It has become "substantive," Illich says. By this he means both that it has taken on the character of a stuff – of something palpable – and that it has acquired substance in the more philosophical and theological sense of something that can exist in itself – it has become self-standing and self-sufficient. That life has become a stuff can be seen, Illich claims, in the discourses of law, medicine, economics and ecology – all of which claim this stuff as both their jurisdiction and their justification. The law protects it – in several U.S. states one can even sue for "wrongful life" – medicine extends it –

corporations administer it – as manpower or human resources – and ecology studies it. The science of genetics now knows its "language." Demography and journalism tirelessly count its units. Lives lost index disaster; lives saved index social progress. The pursuit of health prolongs it; technology enhances it. Life is known, as never before and it is managed, as never before.

But, at the same time, life transcends all management as what Illich calls a "fetish." This was a favourite word, chosen more for its power to shock than for any particular anthropological resonance. A fetish is a magical object with the power of channelling or fixating certain feelings. "Technological society," he says, "is singularly incapable of generating myths to which people can form deep and rich attachments." And yet such a society, just for its "rudimentary maintenance," requires some way of commanding sentimental and not just rational allegiance. This is the role of the fetish. It is "a Linus blanket…that we can drag around to feel like decent defenders of sacred values". Life is managed as a biopolitical resource, but, as a fetish, it is also something that can be "spoken about in hushed tones as something mysterious, polymorphic, weak, demanding tender protection." What Illich calls 'epistemic sentimentality" can thus attach itself to *life*, at the same time that *life* is being intensively managed. To live under the sign of *life* is to become adept at eliding these seemingly contradictory connotations. One learns to slide smoothly from one to the other without this operation ever having to come into consciousness as such. With a single verbal gesture, we revere what we manage, and manage what we revere.

Life, Illich says, "tends to void" both the moral and the legal "concept of a person." For him, it is in "the notion of 'person' [that] the humanism of Western humanism is anchored." A person possesses a clear boundary, and an inviolable integrity. A life does not. One *is* a person; one can, as the saying goes, "get a life." Lives can be a evaluated and improved in ways that persons cannot. A doctor, facing me as a person, faces a certain story and a certain unknown destiny – there is a lot he or she must learn in order to treat me. A doctor facing me as a life can discern everything he or she needs to know from my test results.

Lives vary, of course, as the skillful physician will recognize, but not quite in the same way that persons vary.

Life, for Illich, was also the sign of a profound change in "religiosity" – a term that he used to refer to the feelings, gestures and barely conscious dispositions that might not be captured by the more formal word religion. "My nose, my intuition, and also my reason tell me," he said in 1992, "that we might be at a historical threshold, a watershed, a point of transition to a new stage of religiosity." This idea had first taken hold of him a couple of years earlier, he told me, while he stood in the kitchen of the apartment of a group of graduate students whom he was visiting:

> On the icebox door two pictures were pasted. One was the blue planet and one was the fertilized egg. Two circles of roughly the same size – one bluish, the other one pink. One of the students said to me, "These are our doorways to the understanding of life." The term *doorway* struck me profoundly. This stuck with me for quite a few months, until, for a totally different reason, I…took down a book of Mircea Eliade['s]. Eliade has been for many of us a teacher of religious science…And, going through this book, I came to the conclusion that better than anyone else I had studied he brings out the concept of *sacrum*. The term *sacrum,* the Latin noun corresponding to our *sacred,* has been used by religious scientists to describe a particular place in the topology of any culture. It refers to an object, a locality, or a sign which, within that culture, is believed to be – this young lady was right – a doorway. I had always thought of it as a threshold, a threshold at which the ultimate appears, that which, within that society, is considered to be true otherness, that which, within a given society, is considered transcendent. For Eliade, a society becomes a conscious unity not just in relation to neighboring societies – we are not *you* – but also by defining itself in relation to what's beyond.

The pink disk and the blue disk, Illich concluded, performed, very precisely, the function Eliade described. Just as much as the megaliths at Stonehenge, the Ka'bah in Mecca, or the *omphalos* of the earth at ancient Delphi, they were *sacrums.* But, as "emblems for scientific facts," they were *sacrums* of an entirely new kind. The "ultimate" which appeared at earlier "doorways" beckoned from a beyond that was transcendent – the opposite and other of this world with which it was

understood to be radically discontinuous. What appears in the doorway of the two disks is more of the same – a realm of the invisibly small or the invisibly large to which we can gain access only with electron microscopes or the vast explosive power required to overcome gravity but which is yet no different than what is at hand. The doorways at which *life* is experienced and understood are, in Illich's words, "a frontier with no beyond." Like the endless virtuality that extends beyond the computer screen, they open to an infinity without difference. The new religiosity he had discovered was a "spirituality" of pure immanence, in which virtual objects, conjured out of the womb of technology, present both a here and a beyond at once.

Life as pure immanence is uniquely available – it opens itself to our microphones and our cameras, our microscopes and our scanners. *Life* is at our command, even as we are at *life*'s command. We manage what we praise, administer what we venerate. Both aspects are at play in the notion of responsibility for *life* which has played such an important role in the discourses of the pandemic and which seems to be the main concern of both my interlocutors. Palaver says, "We are responsible for each other's life. It is our highest responsibility, for which we may even have to sacrifice our lives." Dupuy evokes "the risk of infecting one's loved ones" as the standard one should apply to one's own behaviour. To criticize either the ideological construction of the pandemic or the counter-productive measures adopted against it is to flirt with irresponsibility – the reckless disregard for the lives of others which both Dupuy and Palaver deprecate and fear. But the word *responsibility*, according to Illich, is something of a trap – a word that's easier to get into than to get out of. The key issue for him is whether the thing for which I am said to be responsible is within my reach, within my power, and within my understanding. "*Responsibility* catches," he says, by imputing to the one being made responsible some imaginary power– it might be the power to overcome racism, save life on earth, or end the pandemic by staying home. But very often Illich says this power "turns out to be phoney." And that makes responsibility "the ideal base on which to build the new religiosity of which I speak, in the name of which people become more than ever administrable, manageable."

No challenge is offered here to behaviour that is prudent, considerate or courteous. Illich's concern was with illusion, moral grandiosity and epistemological confusion. The last is particularly important in the present case. Despite immediate domestication in a thousand cartoons as a spikey malevolent little demon, little was known about SARS COV-2 when it first appeared, and much is still in question, including its origins, the mortality it causes, its mode of transmission, and how it is best prevented and treated, But, at the same time, "consistent messaging" and "following *the* science" having been emphasized. This has been seen to require an effective censorship, first to keep perfectly normal scientific dissensus out of the news, and second to lend an air of obviousness and impregnability to what are in fact scientifically doubtful precautions. (An example of the first is the marginalization of dissenting public health experts like former Ontario chief medical officer of health Richard Schabas and former Manitoba head Joel Kettner in Canada. The best example of the second is the use of masks, dismissed as useless at the beginning of the pandemic, then, without new evidence, made compulsory and indisputable.) This creates a strange situation with regard to responsibility. Real response-ability depends on an intelligible situation in which I can respond and reach a practical judgment about what to do. But the pandemic, while real for those who are ill, has also been played out in the realm of hypothesis, model, and metaphor. This means that responsibility is often exercised not in the face of an actual neighbour but in relation to a risk profile. This hypothetical neighbour, in effect, goes on for ever. And so we are, as Illich says, "caught."

How we are caught is best illustrated by the idea of risk. This was the contemporaty preoccupation that most worried Illich, who called it today's "most important religiously celebrated ideology." "Risk awareness" he said is "an invitation to intensive self-algorithmization," and, as such, it is "disembodying." The crucial point is that risk does not pertain to an individual person – no one knows what will happen to me individually. It is a calculation of the frequency with which a given event will happen in a population or class that shares some attribute or set of attributes – a prediction of what *might* happen to someone *like*

me. The individual is displaced or decentred and replaced by a mathematical construct. To speak about "my risk" is, therefore, to conflate what should be two entirely distinct ways of speaking, and to introduce a hypothetical dimension into my own flesh. Illich became aware of this predicament through the German legal regime which requires pregnant women to undergo genetic counselling, so that they can become conversant with the various risks attending their pregnancies and then make an informed choice – a responsible decision – about whether to proceed. Illich found this horrifying, particularly when he found out, through his friend and colleague Silya Samerski's study of these counselling sessions, that women regularly mistook statements about risk as statements about their own pregnancies.

Risk in its colloquial meaning is part of living. No one could safely walk to the corner store without some estimate of possible hazards based on past experience. But, when formalized and mathematized risk defines a new type of social order that German sociologist Ulrich Beck called a "risk society" (*Risokogesellschaft*). In such a society an unprecedented intrusion of the hypothetical into the actual occurs. This is enacted in two ways. The first is that advanced modernity as a whole is a giant uncontrolled risk – an ongoing science experiment. We will find out what it means to have "weapons of mass destruction" stockpiled all over the world after the fact – the experiment is still in progress. The same is true for homelier examples like mobile phones or the internet - to take just two everyday technologies that are currently transforming social life in completely unpredictable ways. This element of uncontrolled and uncontrollable risk is inherent a way of life in which constant technological innovation is regarded as good, necessary and inevitable. "When you see something that is technically sweet," said physicist Robert Oppenheimer, with reference to his leading role in the creation of nuclear weapons, "you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success."

This uncontrolled, universal and barely endurable risk generates, it seems to me, a compensation: a zealous attention to those risks which

apparently *can* be controlled. This is the second way in which Beck's risk society is enacted – in our preoccupation with safety, our "zero tolerance," our constant scanning for incipient "problems." "Risk awareness" – "religiously celebrated," as Illich says – is the complement to uncontained risk. This type of awareness requires people to live outside and beyond their embodied experience. It also requires them to dominate the future in a novel way. Once the likelihood of some unwanted eventuality has been ascertained, one can take steps to prevent its occurrence – the at-risk pregnancy is terminated, security cameras are installed, safety become the promise of every institution. Prudence passes over into obsession; "be safe" becomes the new farewell.

Illich, by his own account, lived for surprises. "Our hope of salvation," he told the graduating class the University of Puerto Rico in 1969, "lies in our being surprised by the Other. Let us learn always to receive further surprises. I decided long ago to hope for surprises until the final act of my life – that is to say, in death itself." In the first half of his career, he saw the routinization of charity through service institutions as the main threat to the spirit of surprise. Service institutions replace the fitful, spontaneous unreliable workings of personal vocation with a guaranteed response. Later I believe he saw "risk awareness" in the same light. A risk is a probability distribution in a population, it is not a person. A person invites discernment – careful attention to an unrepeatable story – a risk is an algorithm, an operational rule that tells you what to do in a case *like* this. But there may a world of difference between *this* case and a case *like* this. Surprise is the enemy when following a rule.

This is not to say that risk has no proper place in the world. An actuary needs precise knowledge of the frequency of certain adverse events; a surgeon would be remiss in not weighing the harms of intervention versus the benefits. Like much in Illich's thought this is a question of degree, or balance. In medicine for example, one needs to ask whether knowledge of risk supplements personal knowledge of the patient, or replaces it, so that the patient, in effect, becomes the risk.

The same question applies to the genetic counselling sessions for pregnant women that made such a big impression on Illich through Silya Samerski's research. Does the woman being counselled know the difference between herself, and the risk that she carries as a member of a class?. To internalize risk is to become, in effect, somebody else. The unique is replaced by the general; the possible gives way to the probable; hope yields to calculable expectation. Risk becomes a problem when it moves from the position of a qualified and partial form of knowledge to a "religiously celebrated ideology".

The god that rules the realm of risk is *life*. All is done to enhance, to extend and to save life. "I have got up each morning," said British Health Minister Matt Hancock the other day, in extenuation of his conduct during the pandemic, "and I have asked, what must I do to protect life?" The interests of life mandate and superintend risk awareness. The concepts are akin in their generality. Both absorb the particular and the personal into the abstract and synoptic. One attends to risk, finally, in order to conserve life.

This astonishing and stupefying generality make *life*, according to Illich a plastic word. A plastic word is a word which is all connotation and no denotation, a word which can go anywhere and do anything because it is subject to no limit. It is a bare, unshaded light that is never turned off. Illich first spoke of such words as "amoeba words," a term he used in *Deschooling Society* for a term "so flexible" that it can fit "any interstice of [a] language." When Illich found a kindred spirit in Uwe Pörksen, a novelist and a professor of German literature at the University of Freiburg whom Illich met at the newly-established *Wissenschaftkolleg* in Berlin in 1980, they developed this concept further under the name of plastic words. Pörksen continued to work on what they began together and in 1988 published his book *Plastikwörter: Die Sprache einer Internationalen Diktatur,* which was translated into English as *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* in 1995.

Plastic words, among other things, are words plucked from the vernacular and put through what Illich once called "a scientific laundry." They then return to everyday use with a fresh scent of

expertise and the appearance of wearing a lab coat. In the movie *Cool Hand Luke,* when the chain gang "captain" utters the often-quoted line, "What we've got here is…failure to communicate," the irony depends on *communication*'s character as a plastic word. To communicate is no longer just to connect, as a communicating passageway connects, it is to engage a *process* which can be studied and formalized with scientific precision. To speak of communication is to refer to a realm in which an expert knows, better than you, when you're communicating and when you're not. The word *information* goes through a similar history. An old colloquial term was coopted by "information science" and reconstructed as a matter of signal to noise ratio or of bits and bytes. This lent the word an aura or halo which it retained in common use, so that when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation introduced "Information Radio," it invoked a "communication" from this higher plane of science. The CBC wasn't just telling you something – it was providing *Information.* Plastic words become professional resources. With *communication* or *development,* experts can build and make the world as malleable as the words themselves.

It was with "a sense of sudden horror," therefore, that Illich realized that *life* might have become a plastic word – a word that functions primarily as a professional resource. He shared his reluctant intuition with Uwe Pörksen and found that his old friend was even more appalled than he at the idea that the word life could ever become a member of this egregious category:

> When I came to Pörksen and said, "Uwe, I think I've found the worst of them, *life*, he became very silent. For the first time…I had the impression that he became angry with me, disappointed in me. He was offended. And it took about six months or nine months before we could speak about that issue again, because it is just unthinkable that something as precious and beautiful as life should act as an amoeba word.

Pōrksen's horror was an index of Illich's own.

To summarize then, before moving on to our current circumstances: Illich regarded *life* as an idol – a man-made god in whose form we worship ourselves, while at the same time generating a sacred which

mandates and justifies our manipulation of living. He claimed that *life* had become the object and anchor of "a new stage of religiosity" – a further perversion of the Biblical understanding of life as an implication of God's breath. He thought that life had become a "substantive" – a stuff to be counted and conserved, a resource to be enhanced and administered. He held that the idea of each one as a person – a unrepeatable and inscrutable being pervaded by a "mysterious historicity" – was being replaced by system concepts in which individuality dissolves. And he believed finally that the word *life* had become the site of a fateful "conceptual collapse of the borderline" between "model and reality" and between "process and substance." This collapse is expressed in our thinking that in becoming the protectors, champions and devotees of life we have touched *life itself* without remainder, reservation or detour.

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How does all this pertain to the present situation, and to the fears of my interlocutors that Illich is being recklessly misappropriated by Dupuy's "covidoskeptics"? Well the thing that impressed me most about the onset of the pandemic was the blind certainty with which everyone acted once the W.H.O. uttered the magic word *pandemic* on March 11, 2020. Formerly, the conventional wisdom in public health would have urged prudence, calm, and targeted action to quarantine the sick and protect the vulnerable. But, now, suddenly, it was understood by all, seemingly, that fear was our friend and ally, that as many as possible must be quarantined for as long as possible, and that any policy that hinted at accommodation with this new reality was reckless – "Herd immunity's a great strategy, if you don't mind millions of dead," as one Canadian headline read. To my amazement, the ugly term *lockdown*, previously used mainly in prisons and occasionally in schools, completely changed its valence and became an expression of our regard for one another. Other surprises, for me, were that the "health care system" had to be "protected" from a health emergency and that we would religiously "follow the science" long before there was any relevant science to follow. Epidemiologist like John Ionannidis of Stanford were ignored when they warned of a "fiasco" amounting to

"jumping off a cliff" if draconian policies were adopted before anyone knew for sure just how infectious and how lethal the new disease actually was.

It quickly became difficult to question the costs of lockdown. Scientific dissensus, though widespread, was largely swept under the carpet. "Canada is at war" declared a major Canadian newspaper, and dissent, in wartime, can be construed as treason. In Canada a distinguished group of public health veterans, including several former chief medical officers of health, released a statement calling for the restoration of "a balanced approach" in which harms are intelligently weighed against benefits and a single disease is not the sole focus and preoccupation of government policy. This statement was ignored, and those who signed it were largely excluded from major media. An effective censorship was established. When three eminent epidemiologists – Sunetra Gupta, Jayanta Bhattacharya and Martin Kulldorf – produced the Great Barrington Declaration, calling for a policy of what they called "Focused Protection" in place of universal quarantine, their intervention was not even reported in major Canadian media, despite the fact that all they were arguing for was the restoration of the *status quo ante* in public health. More recently the College of Physicians of Ontario, the medical governing body in my native province, has threatened "investigation" and "disciplinary action" against physicians questioning vaccination, the utility of masks and social distancing, and the value of lockdowns. Whether in the media, in medicine or in government only approved opinions are to be expressed.

Of particular concern to me in this has been the reinforcement of what I have written about elsewhere as the myth of Science, by which I mean essentially the idea that there is an institution called Science which speaks in a single unquestionable voice. Whenever someone speaks of "*the* science" this myth is engaged. Sciences, by their nature, are plural, contestable and subject to endless messy revision. To speak of them in the singular, and then treat this conflation as an oracle, has two profoundly pernicious consequences. First it pre-empts policy. Neither the harms supposedly averted by lockdowns nor the harms

supposedly created by them are definite data. There is no science that can precisely ascertain either because, in both cases, certain questionable founding assumptions will be involved, along with many other models and might-have-beens. (Not to belabour what should be obvious, but the same society cannot be, at the same time, locked down and not locked down, which is the only way that a definitive "scientific" comparison between the two conditions could be undertaken.) This is why people, at the moment, are so passionately and, I would claim, quite legitimately divided on the effectiveness of lockdowns – they are starting from different assumptions, comparing dissimilar cases, and making varying allowances and adjustments for these dissimilarities. To imagine that "Science" could sort all this out is, in my opinion, a destructive and reactionary fantasy. Politics is the sphere of moral choice – the sphere in which decisions about how we are going to live are properly made. Science simply cannot tell you whether it's right to let an old person die alone in order to obviate some necessarily hypothetical risk of spreading infection. "Following the science" in cases where science either doesn't apply or doesn't exist is, therefore, a formula for the complete hollowing out of politics. I have for a long time agreed with the view of French philosopher of science Bruno Latour who holds that we can only get "down to earth" through a revival of politics and that this revival will depend on a redefinition of the sciences that breaks the stranglehold of mythified Science on politics. It seems to me, accordingly, that the reinforcement of the myth of Science that the pandemic has made possible is something that must be fought.

The second pernicious consequence of this myth is the injury to the sciences themselves. Despite the censorship that has been exercised during the pandemic, anyone with an open mind and a variety of sources will still have noticed the fundamental disagreements that have divided epidemiologists, virologists, infectious disease specialists and public health experts from the outset. These disagreements are normal, expectable and healthy. What has been unhealthy is the fiction of unanimity upheld by those claiming to know and to follow *the* science. This fiction, in my view, perpetuates a false image of the sciences in

which all variability, contingency and bias is suppressed. Worse, its fundamentalism breeds the very anti-science which it intends to oppose. The sciences will thrive and serve their proper purposes only when they are no longer mistaken for the voice of Nature or the voice of God.

The policies of mass quarantine followed by many governments during the last year have sown various ominous and fateful consequences. Basic rights have been eliminated; livelihoods have been lost; a crippling debt has been incurred; social relations have been virtualized; panic has been encouraged; the arts have been decimated; and a hundred other troubles have festered as a result of an exclusive focus on COVID-19. Whether the benefits of these policies have offset these costs is, as I've tried to show, a political question. I'm obviously doubtful and inclined to think that the "focused protection" option put forward by the Great Barrington Declaration would have been the wiser course. But what really preoccupies me is why something so clearly debatable cannot, seemingly, be debated. And this is where I think Illich comes back into the picture.

Illich, as far back as the 1980's, detected among his contemporaries a new "conceptual and perceptual topology," a new "mental space," he said, which was "non-continuous with the past." It seems to me that the concepts behind which most have obediently lined up in the last year belong to this new topology. Notable are the concepts of risk, safety, management, and, above all, *life*. We have been "practicing" and acculturating these ideas for many years, but it took a pandemic to show how completely they have taken hold. Mass quarantine appeared as an unquestionably necessary step, and not as a debatable novelty, because *life* must be protected, *risk* must be averted, *safety* must be paramount. The damage to established styles of conviviality and engrained cultural habits was endurable because these new concepts increasingly determine our way of life – they *are* our culture. The idea of distancing and avoidance as a practice of solidarity worked because enough people already thought of themselves as components of an immune system – a life writ large – rather than as members of a polity or culture. The

contrast was stark in the case of religious worship. The rituals of health and safety were approved and encouraged; religious rituals were banned. The first were treated as consensual, substantive, and mandatory; the second as empty optional husks practiceable only at the pleasure of the state.

When Illich wrote on "deschooling," promoting it as the *sine qua non* of any "movement for human liberation" he argued not for the elimination of schools but for their "disestablishment" – a word most of his readers would have associated entirely with religion. The government, says the first amendment to the U.S. constitution, may "make no law with respect to an establishment of religion." Illich's proposal failed because few shared his opinion that schooling should be considered "an establishment of religion" rather than as something more utilitarian. Religion becomes perceptible as such only when it becomes an optional belief, rather than a self-evident way of life. It was precisely in order to marginalize and contain it that religion was redefined as belief, rather than as practice, during the modern period.

My point is that Illich's "new stage of religiosity," centred on *life*, is not easy to perceive as such. It may stand out for committed members of the Abrahamic faiths which centre life in the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" and so do not see the preservation and prolongation of life as either an exclusive good or as the highest good. But for those who live within the horizons of this religiosity, it must necessarily take the form of something obvious and unquestionable. When I spoke recently to a surgeon who wanted to convince me to have a surgery which he believed would extend my "life expectancy," I had the impression that he simply could not understand how any other object – a seeking after the proper "hour of my death" for example – was even possible. Life, for him, is an unlimited good, death an unqualified evil. Whatever is made sacred becomes untouchable and unquestionable. Before *life,* as that precious stuff which we must at all hazards save, all must bow and fall silent. This allows government to go on *behind a veil*, as it were. The image is precise inasmuch as it was a veil which sheltered the Holy of Holies from view in the Second Temple

in Jerusalem. It was this veil which the Gospels say was torn in two at the hour of the Crucifixion, profaning the old sacred and opening the door, eventually, to our reverence for life-in-itself, life as its own god.

To sum up: I believe that during the last year people have been made less competent, less aware, more frightened and more prone to ritualism and sentimentality. Fatal myths, like the myth of *the* Science, have been strengthened. More people have been consigned to the new proletariat whose only remaining job is to collect welfare, consume entertainment and cheer on command. The World Economic Forum has been emboldened to cook up its Great Reset by which monopoly capitalism will be finally made indistinguishable from socialism. Disabling professional hegemonies have been reinforced. Difficult conversations – about Covid vaccination, let's say – have been more difficult, if not impossible, by reckless polarization. The sovereign who authorizes these developments is *Life,* along with the lesser, attendant divinities who carry its train, like risk, safety and management. I believe that Illich saw this coming, and that I remain in tune with him on this point.

Earlier I told the story of the young man who wondered, after listening to Illich lecture on *Medical Nemesis* whether Ilich's proposal was to "let people die." I'm sure the same question could now be asked of me. It's a strange question become it implies that it's up to me, or Illich, or whoever else might be challenged in this way, to allow or not allow death. Ancient images of the Fates show them spinning and cutting the cloth of destiny, allotting each one an unchangeable portion at birth. The contemporary image is the opposite. Nothing determines our fates except the vigilance of the institutions that protect us. We will live until, at the termination of treatment, we are "let" die. The hubris of this image mirrors the fatalism of the earlier one. Illich was a man of "the middle way," which for him meant not mediocrity but the razor's edge of constantly renewed discernment. He did not advocate wantonly letting people die, and no more did he advocate keeping them alive whatever the cost. Nothing will tell us in advance where the balance should lie, but we will certainly never find it by outlawing discussion.

The idea that life and death, or good and evil are inextricably tangled in the world is not a new idea, and should not be a controversial one. Christians have the parable of the wheat and the tares to teach it to them; Buddhists have the idea that good and evil are of "co-dependent origin." Only in a civilization completely seized by what Illich once called "a compulsion to do good" would this idea require defense or explication. But, having to defend it puts the defender in the peculiar position of seeming to speak for whatever evil the latest war is supposedly rooting out. I believe it was Illich's view, expressed in his wonderful essay "Research by People", that a rough and ready distinction can be drawn between technology that "remedies" certain ills and incommodities of the human condition and technology that aims, in Francis Bacon's words, at "mastery over nature." This idea of technology as remedy which he ascribes to Hugh of St. Victor, is as close as he ever came, and as close as he thought he was ever likely to come, to specifying a principle of enoughness, sufficiency or limit on which a new post-Promethean, post-Baconian philosophy of technology could be founded. However, this principle is construed it will certainly stipulate things not to be done as well as things to be done. *Life*, on the other hand, exerts an unlimited demand. It is the monotonous, unshadowed and endless good that corrupted Christianity bequeaths to modernity. In the last year we have pursued it as never before and without even noticing the watershed that is being crossed. To "save lives" we have turned the world upside down, accepting censorship and intrusive social control, abandoning the old, and immolating the economically marginal. We have allowed a further mythification of what was already badly mythified – Science as an immaculately conceived and infallible oracle. We have opened the door to intensive virtualization, increased fear, and injured conviviality. Was it worth it? is my question.

To conclude then: Both Wolfgang Palaver and Jean-Pierre Dupuy have suggested that Illich is either being misinterpreted or pressed too far. In response, I have tried to draw out the implications of Illich's denunciation of life as an idol, and to show that what his "nose, his intuition and his reason" told him forty years ago has been much more

fully revealed and realized in the meanwhile. What I would now like to know is where the difference with my interlocutors lies. Do they think I am wrong about the damage done in the last year? Do they think I am misrepresenting Illich? Or do they think that Illich himself is wrong?

David Cayley,
june 11, 2021

https://www.davidcayley.com/blog/2021/6/11/concerning-life-1